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# IS THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY ON THE WANE?

BY SIR GEORGE ARTHUR, BT.

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IN various quarters and in various ways, interest attaches to the question whether the British aristocracy is, as an institution, on the wane.

Thirty or forty years ago, there were hardly two opinions on the subject. Almost everybody believed that "aristocracy" was, as a political if not as a social force, nearly played out. On this point, men of various opinions were substantially agreed; some regretted, some feared, some welcomed the prospect which all alike anticipated. The era of popular government had set in in Great Britain as in other countries; the new many-headed master was to grow and develop, to become more and more conscious of his strength, and at last to use that strength in establishing his supremacy. The rising flood of democracy was to swamp and overwhelm all other authorities than its own. The deluge would sweep all before it. The near future was to bring the disestablishment and spoliation of the Church, it was to see the abolition of the House of Lords, even perhaps of the Throne, though the possibility was conceded that the latter, as a sort of decorative and comparatively inexpensive figure-head of the state, might be suffered to remain at least for a while. Those were the palmy days of Little Englandism, when the principles of Cobden were regarded as part of the appointed order of the universe.

But these prognostications of revolution failed of verification. Reform Act has followed Reform Act, the masses of the people have been enfranchised, a good many Parliaments have been elected on various issues, and all with this sum of results:—the Church stronger than ever and disestablishment removed from the field of practical politics; the House of Lords so powerful as successfully to have withstood, and to have won emphatic

popular approval in withstanding, the principal legislative measure of the strongest Minister of modern times; the Throne visibly and beyond a doubt more deeply rooted in the hearts of the people than at any previous period of our history; and, for the rest, Little Englandism absolutely discredited, Imperialism an accepted creed, and even Cobdenism sensibly weakened.

It would seem, then, that a wholly inaccurate survey was taken in those days of the national situation, present and to come. The root of the error lay in reliance on an analogy which proved to be false. It was thought that the British people, under a given set of circumstances, would behave just as the people of other countries behaved under like circumstances. In particular, the example of France was supposed to have shown that to entrust political power to the masses was like playing with fire in the midst of inflammable materials. The event proved the exact opposite, so far as Great Britain is concerned. The Franchise Acts of 1867-1885 have had as their sequel the maintenance in power of the Tory party for twenty years out of thirty-five. The one statesman who had correctly foreseen the future was Mr. Disraeli, whose knowledge of the British people was deeper than that of most of his contemporaries. He believed that the extension of political power would bring an increase of stability to the state; that not only the Throne but the aristocracy would emerge from the coming ordeal with even enhanced prestige and with renewed vitality. Mr. Disraeli, too, avoided the common error of identifying the aristocracy exclusively with the titled classes. He thoroughly appreciated the position of what has been termed the Squirearchy. From time immemorial, as recent investigation seems to show, the nobility and the gentry have constituted but one class. Sir George Sitwell, in an article recently contributed to the *Ancestor*, which has attracted a considerable amount of attention, has given good reasons for believing that in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there were, to speak broadly, but two classes—the “*nobiles*,” who included the earls, barons, knights, esquires and franklins, and the “*ignobiles*,” or villeins, citizens and burgesses. There was no distinction of blood between noblemen and gentlemen. Their class was one, some members of it being more notable but not more noble than others. In the broader, which is also the proper, sense of the term, the aristocracy includes both its titled and untitled members. The true

definition of a "gentleman," Sir George Sitwell tells us, is a free-man whose ancestors have always been free. "In blood he represents the unconquered tribesman of Germany or Britain, and in name the ancient liberty of Rome." The same writer adds: "Even the most earnest Radical will hardly repress some feeling of respect for the families which clung to freedom, or fought for it, when most of the world was enslaved, nor ever 'bowed their heads for meat in the evil days.'" But, he notes further, "No one whose forefathers have ever been held in bondage can possibly come under the terms of the definition; we are thus driven to the painful but irresistible conclusion that quite twenty-five per cent. of our peers are not 'gentlemen.'"

When, therefore, the question is propounded, whether the British aristocracy is or is not becoming decadent with respect to its position in the country, it should be understood that the scope of the inquiry is not to be narrowed down to the Peerage. The ranks of the titled classes are, indeed, constantly being recruited from those of the untitled aristocracy. This is no new departure. After the old feudal tenures had disappeared centuries ago, there arose the new titled aristocracy created by the Tudors, and endowed principally out of alienated church property. Another epoch at which there was a large influx of "new men" into its ranks—including a certain number of needy Dutch immigrants—was that of William of Orange. Yet a third was inaugurated by the accession of the House of Hanover to the throne. These three periods of political unrest gave birth to that truly wonderful galaxy, the Whig peerage, which evolved an oligarchy composed of a limited number of aristocratic families, united with each other by ties of blood and intermarriage. The Whig supremacy for long periods overshadowed, not only the House of Lords, but also the House of Commons. This state of things, so far from being terminated or modified by the first Reform Act of 1832, received at that time a new lease of life, the ennobled Whigs attracting to their support the political dissenters and the newly enfranchised ten-pound householders of the lower middle class. The Whig domination, except during a few brief intervals, continued to prevail until the results of Mr. Disraeli's Reform Act of 1867 began to make themselves felt at the General Election of 1874. The new democratic suffrage, while it broke the back of Whig ascendancy, has ever since belied utterly the forebodings of

those who assumed that it would prove hostile to the old order. The British democracy has steadily, and with ever increasing emphasis, refused to accept irreligious education, to consent to the dismemberment of the United Kingdom, to despoil the Church, to attack the House of Lords, to weaken the Throne, or to tolerate the betrayal of the Empire beyond the seas. The effectual clipping of the wings of the old Whig oligarchy was an automatic result of the extension of the franchise, which ended the practical monopoly of political power enjoyed by a mere section of the peerage, in alliance with a class identified with political Dissent.

But that this by no means implied a general hostility on the part of the masses towards the aristocracy as a whole is evident from the significant facts already cited. Whence, then, arose the idea of the gradual waning of the power of the aristocratic class?

So far as this notion has behind it an element of truth, the phenomenon on which it rests is due to several causes. The aristocracy, titled and untitled alike, is essentially connected with the land, and he who runs may read, in large black letters, what has happened to the land and to agriculture in recent years. Agriculture has suffered from foreign competition; the landed interest has suffered with it. Land is going out of cultivation; agricultural labor is increasingly scarce; the laborers, from these as well as from other causes, flock to the towns; the country districts are partially depopulated. Here, in a nutshell, lies one cause of the lessening of the influence of the territorial aristocracy. Meanwhile, the older aristocracy find themselves jostled by the new power of the plutocracy to a large extent cosmopolitan in its character. Socially, the barriers between ranks and classes have been to a large extent broken down, not only by the irruption of people from other social grades into the ancient preserves of the patricians, but by the entry of the latter into commercial pursuits which in former years were outside their ken. A well-known French diplomat remarked not long ago on the (to him) anomaly of a Peer of the Realm taking part in a debate in the great historic chamber of his order, and within an hour afterwards doffing, as it were, his robes and coronet, and being found "operating" on the floor of the Stock Exchange. It cannot be doubted that this blurring of the old lines of social division has involved a real diminution of aristocratic influence. Education, too, has brought men of various social strata together, and in the

composite mass thus formed the aristocratic element has suffered a process of partial submersion.

A superficial survey might tend, indeed, to enforce this conclusion to an undue extent. In Berlin, in Vienna, in St. Petersburg, the man whose name is written in the sacred volume of Gotha is always and everywhere accorded differential treatment, in strict accordance with his rank and status. But in London, and even more in Paris and New York, the greatest territorial magnate or quasi-feudal overlord will, outside the bounds of his own house, find his claims to social consideration subjected to rigid limitations. Thus there really might seem to be some justification for the impression that the patrician order in England has been distinctly lowered, if not buried under a mixed mass of plutocratic and cosmopolitan influences.

The answer is that, while there is a modicum of truth in this view of the matter, it would be a great mistake to suppose that it constitutes anything like the whole truth. In a country such as England, real political power must in the last resort be measured by the number of parliamentary votes which it controls. That territorial influence of the most effective kind actually exists in Great Britain is an undoubted fact. Great land-owners, like the Dukes of Buccleuch and Sutherland, for example, must always wield enormous power within their own domains. Some remarkable details illustrative of the point were forthcoming after the General Election of 1885, memorable as the first election at which the newly-enfranchised agricultural laborers recorded their votes. How much of the old feudal feeling still remained in the country districts was shown by the return to Parliament, even in quite Radical districts, of Conservative landlords well known to and resident among their own people.

These electoral incidents were at the time rightly regarded as furnishing striking testimony to a fact which has since been amply demonstrated, that the masses of the people retain their regard for the lords of the soil, at any rate if and when that regard continues to be deserved.

Nor are these the only signs indicating the same conclusion. In the opinion of many, the Local Government Act of 1888, which established the County Councils, was destined to mark a great diminution in the influence of the territorial aristocracy. But this anticipation, like others of the same kind, has been sig-

nally falsified. Throughout the country, the land-owners have been chosen by their fellow-citizens to take a leading part in the administration of Local Government—an example that has proved so infectious that many of the cities and boroughs have, of late years, for the first time in their annals, insisted on electing Peers to fill the office of Mayor.

Meanwhile, the personal constitution of the House of Commons to this day, as ever in the long and illustrious history of the Mother of Parliaments, points the same moral. A very large proportion of Members of Parliament is still made up of members of old aristocratic families, whose time-honored names are thus continuously identified with the conduct of public affairs.

But what is, perhaps, the most convincing proof of the esteem and respect in which the British aristocracy is deservedly held has still to be adduced. The power of the ancient leaders of the English people may lie dormant, or seemingly dormant, as they abide quietly on their estates, spending their lives apart from the bustle and clamor and self-advertisement of so-called “smart society.” But only let critical junctures occur in the national affairs, and then their true position instantly reasserts itself.

A situation such as that which gave rise to the call to arms in the dark days of the December of 1899, affords a fair test of the national characteristics and national feeling. In an instant, it seemed as though the whole complexion of English society had undergone a transformation. The indifferent, the idlers, the cosmopolitan throng, the men and the women immersed in the pursuit of pleasure or of personal gain, were thrust aside into insignificance and oblivion, while into the arena, before the anxious gaze of the whole nation, stepped the long line of men who heard no call save that of duty, who forgot every motto except that of “Queen and Country.” What, then, at that supreme moment proved to be the influence, what was the action, of the territorial magnates? It seems almost invidious to make any selection from a roll of great land-owners, many of whom had already given of their bravest and their best to the cause, and who now flung themselves with ardor into the work of raising the various local contingents imperatively required to supplement the regular forces. To quote but a few names of those who have a real and permanent stake in the country, the Duke of Atholl, the Earls of Clarendon, Lonsdale, and Harewood, Lord Galway, Lord Valen-

tia, Sir Savile Crossley, Sir Watkin Wynn spent their days in a sort of house-to-house visitation of their tenantry and their dependants, recruiting, sifting, inspecting, equipping. "*Nobiles*" like the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Essex, Lord Cranborne, Lord Chesham, Lord Dungarvan, Lord Lovat, Colonel Bromley-Davenport almost reproduced before our eyes the old feudal arrangement by which the mediæval lords personally led their own retainers in the field.

The patriotic services thus rendered by the true aristocracy, coupled with the devoted personal self-sacrifice which their class, in comradeship with other classes of the community, showed during the South-African struggle, have done much to knit together the various social strata in fresh and closer bonds of mutual sympathy and respect.

The ranks of the titled classes, as has already been observed, are continually filled with fresh recruits. Time was when distinguished merit or public service did not always constitute a claim to a peerage. Great soldiers and sailors, distinguished statesmen and eminent jurists received the honor; but they had to share it with political partisans, court intriguers and inconvenient members of the House of Commons. Of late years, the system of selection has, to an increasing extent, been based on better principles, and it is not too much to say that promotion to the House of Lords is, in these days, a means of making the Upper Chamber thoroughly representative of all that is best and worthiest in the community. The titled aristocracy has everything to gain by such additions to its numbers as Lord Wolseley, Lord Kelvin, Lord Armstrong, Lord Kitchener, Lord Goschen, Lord Avebury, Lord Strathcona, Lord Rothschild—men who seek to maintain at its highest point the standard of English tradition in all its purity, and who contribute to the national credit their great assets of valor, of intellect, of statesmanship, of culture, of experience, of political and commercial honor; men who, indeed, were by nature and in the strictest sense of the term aristocrats before ever they were formally ennobled by letters patent.

So long as the leaders in the land base their claim to lead on a sense of responsibility incurred and duty to be done, there is little fear that they will find themselves bereft of honor and support.

GEORGE ARTHUR.